

FIGHT FOR THE LIVING: REMEMBER THE DEAD¹

Peter Coyle R.I.P.

At 10 o'clock this morning a contingent of disabled asbestos victims met with Glasgow's Lord Provost, demanding that an official inquiry takes place over the tragic death of Mr Peter Boyle. Another dead victim of the deadly asbestos fibre is scarcely a newsworthy topic these days. What makes the death of Peter Boyle significant is that it occurred at an Extraordinary General Meeting held by Clydeside Action on Asbestos at the City Halls on Saturday morning. The 58 year old man was a committed member of the group. During the opening minutes he collapsed with a heart attack and later died without regaining consciousness. The ambulance men had arrived almost immediately and fought long and hard to save the man's life. They were assisted by some of those present for the EGM. There was no medical aid of any kind available within this centrepiece of Glasgow's "Halls" department.

Of the 120 or so in attendance that Saturday morning (10th October) most were asbestos victims, or the widows and relatives of victims. Among them was exshipwright Pat McCrystal whose out-of-court settlement of £50,000 occurred in controversial circumstances two weeks ago inside Edinburgh's Court of Session. He described it himself as having "a gun held at his head" to take the out-of-court offer; he had been wanting to get the case into court to try for a court ruling. Pat has the terminal disease mesothelioma, a rare asbestos tumour in most parts of the world but not in the West of Scotland where its incidence is some 8 times greater than the national average. He is well known on the Clyde and among offshore workers; he spent the last 30 years training hundreds of apprentices in Govan.

Many people at the meeting were disturbed and upset by the tragedy. The Chairman (an exlagger who suffers asbestosis himself) pointed out that it could have happened to any one of them. Peter Boyle was also committed to Clydeside Action. That was why he had made such an effort to get to the EGM crisis meeting. Every asbestos victim must live and cope with progressive lung death and this affects the blood stream and oxygen flow, placing abnormal strain on the heart. The Chairman felt even for Peter's sake the meeting should continue.

¹ This was published pseudonymously somewhere

The view was expressed that this was a time also for anger and for positive action. Feelings ran high. It was now suggested that a deputation should meet in protest with the Lord Provost. This was agreed and the EGM continued.

The members were being addressed by the present Counsellor² who is a voluntary worker with the group. He gave the background to why it was Pat McCrystal and other victims were fighting so hard to get a compensation case into court and why these out-of-court settlements have got to stop. Ironically Peter Boyle himself was due to go to court on Wednesday 14th October. And now the sad fact is that because the man died the major part of his compensation claim will die with him. This is because of the notorious EFFECT OF DEATH ON DAMAGES under Scottish Law. If an asbestos victim dies in England his widow gets the compensation settlement but NOT in Scotland. Scots Law only benefits the big insurance companies and the asbestos industry and all the employers who have contaminated their workers by forcing them to work in conditions they know might kill them.

The Counsellor was arguing that if a case can be heard in court then there's a chance the judge will give a ruling that might go some way to getting the "punitive" side of things taken into account. It's only when that happens that there's ever going to be a chance of getting the guilty people to face criminal charges at some future date; and until that happens they will go scot free for what amounts to manslaughter on thousands of workers.

Eventually the discussion went to the floor. There was a real sense of outrage at the treatment by the authorities of every last victim of industrial disease and the inability of the official trades union movement to take it on board as a real fighting issue.

The C.A.A. members contain many ex-trade union activists. The Chairman is a former shop steward who himself has worked offshore, and also on the committee is John Todd who's been fighting the asbestos issue for 30 years and lost five of his family to the "deadly bug". These two and others were blacklisted. Todd has been barred by trades union officials on numerous occasions from addressing the rank and file on health and safety issues.

Somebody made the point from the floor about Peter Boyle: that on the Friday afternoon a voluntary worker phoned the City Halls to have it confirmed that access for

I referring to myself here

the disabled asbestos victims would be available from the 1st floor. But when the membership arrived next morning they found the Candleriggs entrance closed to them by the janitorial staff. This meant the disabled exworkers were denied the use of the lift and forced to walk round to Albion Street then climb the tortuous, steep staircase to the 3rd floor. A few returned home. Many of those who made it were in great physical distress. One guy was confined to a wheelchair these days, and he had to be more less carried up.

What angers them is the general lack of awareness of the tragic reality of asbestos disease. They argue that what happened in Glasgow on Saturday the 10th of October sums up the totally ignorant attitude of the authorities. And this translates into callousness. The DSS actually describes the fatal effects of asbestos lung death as "breathlessness". The asbestos victims see this as a complete abuse of language. It just reflects the DSS abuse of the victims themselves. And since the DSS is a department of government, their attitude has to be seen as the attitude of the state itself. The members of C.A.A. now seek direct intervention by the medical profession in what they regard as a straight fight for civil rights and natural justice.

So on Monday morning 25 to 30 asbestos victims and non-victim supporters entered the City Chambers at the back of 10 o'clock. The cameras and mainstream media were waiting to record developments. Inside the lobby the "uniforms" told them they couldn't see the Lord Provost because he had a meeting on but somebody from the Town Clerks Department would meet two delegates. This was knocked back immediately. The "uniforms" were told by the asbestos victims it was the Lord Provost or nothing. An exlagger who suffers asbestosis told the head guy they were there to see the organ grinder and weren't dealing with any monkeys. It was obvious the uniforms couldn't handle this kind of group. The headman lost his temper. It didn't seem to dawn on him either that the people he was dealing with were disabled.

Again it sums up the general attitude. The headman finally phoned "upstairs" and soon came a "PR suit" down to meet the deputation. This guy said the Lord Provost would agree to meet two delegates. He was told that wasn't good enough. It was the whole deputation or nothing. There were only 25 to 30 folk. What was so difficult about meeting them inside one of the many big rooms? The PR man thought this was unreasonable but was advised by the asbestos victims that it wasn't a point for

negotiation. The deputation would wait in the lobby till the Lord Provost was free.

Off went the "PR suit" back upstairs. It took about half an hour for the guy to come back. Meanwhile the BBC cameras rolled and they took a statement prepared by C.A.A. and read by an exlagger who is now 20% disabled with asbestosis. (C.A.A. gave copies of the statement to the press; it was the one they were presenting to the Lord Provost).

When the PR man came back next time the Lord Provost had agreed to meet the asbestos victims and was waiting for another couple of his colleagues to get to the meeting too. One of them was Councillor Dingwall who is in charge of "Halls". Obviously the "high heid yins" had spent the past hour working out how to deal with the situation but finally had to cave in, not just because of what had happened and because the media were there, but because of the obvious determination of the people waiting downstairs in the lobby.

So more than an hour after entering the City Chambers the meeting was finally set. The deputation now had to explain to the "PR suit" they would need a lift up to the 2nd floor. He didn't grasp the irony.

Eventually they all got up and into the meeting room. The deputation ringed round it with their placards and copies of the Asbestos Charter. The BBC and press were with them, cameras clicking.

The Lord Provost came in with his colleagues and they sat at the big official table in the middle of the floor. It was not an easy meeting for them. There is just no way they are used to having to confront deputations like this. One thing it does show is how the whole idea of picking a couple of delegates to represent everybody is usually a very bad idea. Where possible 'no representation', go in numbers.

The CAA Chairman expressed the need for an inquiry into the events that led to Peter Boyle's tragic death and that the plight of asbestos victims was summed up by the attitude of the "uniforms" at City Halls who had kept the main entrance closed and thus denied them the use of the lift. Either nobody in authority had passed down the word of the real plight of these victims, or else they had been told but hadn't bothered doing anything about it. One of the CAA members had spotted a half a dozen of them sitting in a room drinking tea while the victims were struggling up the steep staircase. The Lord Provost agreed to look into the matter and then, while the cameras rolled, he

signed the universal Charter for the global ban on asbestos. The BBC news bulletins showed this through the rest of that Monday.

It's a sad commentary when it takes the death of a man to gain the attention of the authorities. Especially when the authorities we're speaking about are Labour Party politicians. In respect for people like Peter Boyle and Pat McCrystal surely it is way past time when the official trade union movement started giving real support to groups like Clydeside Action instead of them being forced into the position they were last Monday morning. When the report appeared in the Glasgow Herald² describing Pat McCrystal's fight to get his case heard in court, the GMB attacked the writer in the letters page. The GMB lawyer, Robin Thompson, also attacked him. Apart from one solitary letter from an ex-shipyard worker now dying of mesothelioma, the Glasgow Herald refused to publish any of the many letters in support of Pat McCrystal's fight.

A small C.A.A. delegation went to the mass meeting held by the UIE workers at Clydebank Town Hall on Tuesday morning (13th October) and they got nearly 600 asbestos charters signed by the workers. Maybe it's time union officials started inviting asbestos victims to speak on the true reality of the bitter fight going on across the country to try and get justice. These young workers don't seem to catch on to the fact that these disabled guys with the horrible breathing problems used to be like themselves - not that long ago either.

Fight for the Living: Remember the Dead³.

² see the Herald article

³ there many slogans created by CAA members; this one was also used on the Charter as I recall